

NYU Professor, Author to Lecture on Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Politics Sept. 11

Contributed by Lindsey Phillips
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Joy Connolly

OXFORD, Miss. - To classicists such as New York University's Joy Connolly, a presidential debate is more than just a political face-off; it's also an art form rooted deeply in ancient history and studied by theoreticians for thousands of years.

This connection and its effect on contemporary politics is the subject of Connolly's presentation Sept. 11 at the University of Mississippi. Her lecture, "Classical Rhetoric and Contemporary Politics," begins at 5 p.m. in the Turner Center Auditorium, with a reception immediately following. The event, directed toward a broad audience, is free and open to the public.

"The talk is about the relevance and interests of public speaking in contemporary politics but seen very much through the prism of the tradition of classical rhetoric," Connolly said. "It is not about contemporary politicians, but really about the kinds of ideas ancient thinkers had about public speaking"

Hosted by the Department of Classics, the lecture is a prelude to the first 2008 presidential debate scheduled at UM Sept. 26. It is among dozens of campus events planned to prepare students and local audiences for the face-off, in which the candidates are to focus on national security and foreign policy.

While some ancient Greeks and Romans were suspicious of public speaking, many associated it with virtue, an idea that in present day has practically been reversed, said Connolly, associate professor of classics at NYU and author of "The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome."

Her lecture is to include a historical look at American founders' thoughts on public speaking in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and cover the significance of public speech for a democratic republic. She also plans to discuss critiques and suspicions surrounding rhetoric and examine the idea that rhetoric is considered to be "flattery or puffery." She will take into consideration the views of theorists who "are suspicious of, among other things, emotion in public speech and the quasi-celebrity status of candidates for high office and who advocate an unrealistic and misleading vision of the proper role of speech in a republic."

"There is a longstanding distrust of rhetoric because of its power to call out emotion rather than logic," said Molly Pasco-Pranger, UM assistant professor of classics and organizer of the event. "Dr. Connolly is really going to be asking to what extent public appearance and public speech shape democracy. Does it have a real role in our contemporary democracy? There's always some talk that debates are grandstanding, that they're staged, that it's not really a debate."

Pasco-Pranger said she believes the lecture will help audience members better understand the upcoming presidential debates.

"I think it really helps you think about how you interact with the debates, how you read the debates, how you participate

as a viewer in the debates," she said. "Dr. Connolly is very powerful in her way of connecting the classical world to contemporary issues."

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